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First Ice

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that was enough of a drink
to sedate our friend John
till his cigarette burned
in the crack of his couch

and a black shroud formed
from the black smoke that swarmed
and blocked light forever

from his Irish eyes
that were smiling

each and every time we saw him.

FIRST ICE

I went to a death last week, what was left
of it, my friend John in his coffin, his face
looking like clay all powdered and pasted over
and the hair and eyelashes and mustache
fake because it had been a mess, and his old
father trying not to buckle as he stood there
crying, a ninety-year-old who at fifty had had
a son, and now was trying to absorb yet another
grief. "You'll have to bury me soon," he said
to a friend and she said "Don't be silly!"
and I tried to think of some reason to give
that old man for living. There was a small
red-velvet-padded prayer rail in front of
the coffin, and because I could not think
of anything else to do I kneeled and said
goodbye to my friend. "Goodbye, John,"
I said, noticing that the fake eyelashes
looked like two sleeping centipedes on my friend's
face and that the wig of hair gathered elsewhere

was the final obscenity, and the old man got down
beside me and I heard his heavy breathing and thought
that now I too am old. It has been thirty years
since a death like this one, my friend
who was getting it all together. He too
was the hope of literature and the arts
and he left us on a Winter's day under a sky
grey like a disease—another one gone now
in the filthy snow and cracked ice on tarmac
leaving me with not the slightest idea of what
to say to widows and old fathers
and these women who appear out of nowhere, perfumed
and beyond consoling, sitting off to the side.

IN THE KITCHEN AFTER THE FUNERAL

*"Only by drinking of her
could he fly."*

—James Agee

John is just as they knew him. Eyes are laughing,
you can see, as he stands before a great banana tree
in the rain forest, and the hand holding the picture
is the hand of the girl whose hand belonged to John and now
is careful not to wet with her tears
this picture which is about all she has left. She shared
with him the Amazon river, a jungle and hammock
swung between trees, and this body of gold turning
to lead with its breasts gone suddenly cold.